

# HR COMPLIANCE BULLETIN

## Highlights

### ADA Rules Still Apply but Do Not Prevent Safety Measures

Employers must follow ADA rules while observing emergency guidelines issued by federal, state and local health authorities during the pandemic.

### Employer Guidance

The EEOC's pandemic guidance clarifies that employers may:

- ✓ Require employees to receive COVID-19 vaccinations (but may need to accommodate certain refusals);
- ✓ Ask employees if they have COVID-19 or its symptoms;
- ✓ Require employees to stay home (and to provide medical notes before returning to work) if they have COVID-19 or its symptoms; and
- ✓ Screen applicants for COVID-19 symptoms after making conditional job offers.

## EEOC Updates Guidance on COVID-19, Vaccines and the ADA

On May 28, 2021, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued updated and additional [answers to frequently asked questions](#) (FAQs) about how employers should comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other federal fair employment laws while also observing all applicable emergency workplace safety guidelines during the coronavirus pandemic.

The new and updated FAQs address whether employers may require or provide incentives for employees to receive COVID-19 vaccinations. They were added to guidance that the EEOC first issued on March 18, 2020, and then updated several times. The last update was made in December 2020.

This Compliance Bulletin contains the EEOC's updated FAQs in full, which draw from the EEOC's existing pandemic publication, [Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the ADA](#), to help employers navigate workplace issues related to the COVID-19. The updated and newly added FAQs about vaccinations begin on **page 19** of this document.

Employers are subject to the ADA if they have 15 or more employees. Smaller employers may be subject to similar rules under applicable state or local laws.

## Action Steps

All employers should follow the most current guidelines and suggestions for maintaining workplace safety, as issued by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) and any applicable state or local health agencies. Employers with 15 or more employees should also become familiar with and follow the guidance provided in the EEOC's FAQs about ADA compliance. These and all smaller employers should ensure that they comply with state and local anti-discrimination laws as well.



## A. Disability-Related Inquiries and Medical Exams

### **A.1. How much information may an employer request from an employee who calls in sick, in order to protect the rest of its workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

During a pandemic, ADA-covered employers may ask employees if they are experiencing symptoms of the pandemic virus. For COVID-19, these include symptoms such as fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath or sore throat. Employers must maintain all information about employee illness as a confidential medical record in compliance with the ADA.

### **A.2. (Added April 9, 2020): When screening employees entering the workplace during this time, may an employer only ask employees about the COVID-19 symptoms EEOC has identified as [examples](#), or may it ask about any symptoms identified by public health authorities as associated with COVID-19?**

As public health authorities and doctors learn more about COVID-19, they may expand the list of associated symptoms. Employers should rely on the CDC, other public health authorities and reputable medical sources for guidance on emerging symptoms associated with the disease. These sources may guide employers when choosing questions to ask employees to determine whether they would pose a direct threat to health in the workplace. For example, additional symptoms beyond fever or cough may include new loss of smell or taste as well as gastrointestinal problems, such as nausea, diarrhea, and vomiting.

### **A.3. When may an ADA-covered employer take employees' body temperature during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Generally, measuring an employee's body temperature is a medical examination. Because the CDC and state/local health authorities have acknowledged community spread of COVID-19 and issued attendant precautions, employers may measure employees' body temperature. However, employers should be aware that some people with COVID-19 do not have a fever.

### **A.4. May employers require employees to stay home if they have COVID-19 symptoms?**

Yes. The CDC states that employees who become ill with symptoms of COVID-19 should leave the workplace. The ADA does not interfere with employers following this advice.

### **A.5. When employees return to work, may an employer require doctors' notes certifying their fitness for duty?**

Yes. These inquiries are permitted under the ADA either because they would not be disability-related or would be justified under the ADA standards for disability-related inquiries. As a practical matter, however, doctors and other health care professionals may be too busy during and immediately after a pandemic outbreak to provide fitness-for-duty documentation. Therefore, new approaches may be necessary. For example, employers could rely on local clinics to provide a form, stamp or e-mail to certify that an individual does not have the pandemic virus.

### **A.6. (Added April 23, 2020; Updated Sept. 8, 2020): May an employer administer a COVID-19 test (a test to detect the presence of the COVID-19 virus) when evaluating an employee's initial or continued presence in the workplace?**

The ADA requires that any mandatory medical test of employees be "job related and consistent with business necessity." Applying this standard to the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, employers may take steps to determine if [employees entering the workplace have COVID-19](#) because [an individual with the virus will pose a direct threat](#) to the



health of others. Therefore an employer may choose to administer COVID-19 testing to employees before initially permitting them to enter the workplace and/or periodically to determine if their presence in the workplace poses a direct threat to others. The ADA does not interfere with employers following [recommendations by the CDC](#) or other public health authorities regarding whether, when, and for whom testing or other screening is appropriate. Testing administered by employers consistent with current CDC guidance will meet the ADA’s “business necessity” standard.

Consistent with the ADA standard, employers should ensure that the tests are accurate and reliable. For example, employers may review [information](#) from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration about what may or may not be considered safe and accurate testing, as well as guidance from CDC or other public health authorities. Because the CDC and FDA may revise their recommendations based on new information, it may be helpful to check these agency websites for updates. Employers may wish to consider the incidence of false-positives or false-negatives associated with a particular test. Note that a positive test result reveals that an individual most likely has a current infection and may be able to transmit the virus to others. A negative test means that the individual did not have detectable COVID-19 at the time of testing.

A negative test does not mean the employee will not acquire the virus later. Based on guidance from medical and public health authorities, employers should still require—to the greatest extent possible—that employees observe infection control practices (such as social distancing, regular handwashing, and other measures) in the workplace to prevent transmission of COVID-19.

*Note: Question A.6 and A.8 address screening of employees generally. See Question A.9 regarding decisions to screen individual employees.*

**A.7. (Added June 17, 2020): Does the ADA allow an employer to require antibody testing before permitting employees to re-enter the workplace?**

No. An antibody test constitutes a medical examination under the ADA. In light of the CDC’s [interim guidelines](#) stating that antibody test results “should not be used to make decisions about returning persons to the workplace,” an antibody test at this time does not meet the ADA’s “job related and consistent with business necessity” standard for medical examinations or inquiries for current employees. Therefore, requiring antibody testing before allowing employees to re-enter the workplace is not allowed under the ADA. Please note that an antibody test is different from a test to determine if someone has an active case of COVID-19 (that is, a viral test). The EEOC has already stated that COVID-19 viral tests are [permissible under the ADA](#). The EEOC will continue to closely monitor CDC’s recommendations and could update this discussion in response to changes.

**A.8. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): May employers ask all employees physically entering the workplace if they have been diagnosed with or tested for COVID-19?**

Yes. Employers may ask all employees who will be physically entering the workplace if they have COVID-19 or symptoms associated with COVID-19, and ask if they have been tested for COVID-19. Symptoms associated with COVID-19 include, for example, fever, chills, cough, and shortness of breath. The CDC has identified a [current list of symptoms](#).

An employer may exclude those with COVID-19, or symptoms associated with COVID-19, from the workplace because, as EEOC has stated, their presence would pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others. However, for those employees who are teleworking and are not physically interacting with coworkers or others (for example, customers), the employer would generally not be permitted to ask these questions.



**A.9. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): May a manager ask only one employee—as opposed to asking all employees—questions designed to determine if she has COVID-19, or require that this employee alone have her temperature taken or undergo other screening or testing?**

If an employer wishes to ask only a particular employee to answer such questions, or to have her temperature taken or undergo other screening or testing, the ADA requires the employer to have a reasonable belief based on objective evidence that this person might have the disease. So, it is important for the employer to consider why it wishes to take these actions regarding this particular employee, such as a display of COVID-19 symptoms. In addition, the ADA does not interfere with employers following [recommendations by the CDC](#) or other public health authorities regarding whether, when, and for whom testing or other screening is appropriate.

**A.10. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): May an employer ask an employee who is physically coming into the workplace whether they have family members who have COVID-19 or symptoms associated with COVID-19?**

No. The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) prohibits employers from asking employees medical questions about family members. GINA, however, does not prohibit an employer from asking employees whether they have had contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 or who may have symptoms associated with the disease. Moreover, from a public health perspective, only asking an employee about his contact with family members would unnecessarily limit the information obtained about an employee's potential exposure to COVID-19.

**A.11. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): What may an employer do under the ADA if an employee refuses to permit the employer to take his temperature or refuses to answer questions about whether he has COVID-19, has symptoms associated with COVID-19, or has been tested for COVID-19?**

Under the circumstances existing currently, the ADA allows an employer to bar an employee from physical presence in the workplace if he refuses to have his temperature taken or refuses to answer questions about whether he has COVID-19, has symptoms associated with COVID-19, or has been tested for COVID-19. To gain the cooperation of employees, however, employers may wish to ask the reasons for the employee's refusal.

The employer may be able to provide information or reassurance that they are taking these steps to ensure the safety of everyone in the workplace, and that these steps are consistent with health screening recommendations from CDC. Sometimes, employees are reluctant to provide medical information because they fear an employer may widely spread such personal medical information throughout the workplace. The ADA prohibits such broad disclosures.

Alternatively, if an employee requests reasonable accommodation with respect to screening, the usual accommodation process should be followed; this is discussed in Question G.7.

**A.12. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): During the COVID-19 pandemic, may an employer request information from employees who work on-site, whether regularly or occasionally, who report feeling ill or who call in sick?**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at this time employers may ask employees who work on-site, whether regularly or occasionally, and report feeling ill or who call in sick, questions about their symptoms as part of workplace screening for COVID-19.



**A.13. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): May an employer ask an employee why he or she has been absent from work? May an employer ask an employee why he or she has been absent from work?**

Yes. Asking why an individual did not report to work is not a disability-related inquiry. An employer is always entitled to know why an employee has not reported for work.

**A.14. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): When an employee returns from travel during a pandemic, must an employer wait until the employee develops COVID-19 symptoms to ask questions about where the person has traveled?**

No. Questions about where a person traveled would not be disability-related inquiries. If the CDC or state or local public health officials recommend that people who visit specified locations remain at home for a certain period of time, an employer may ask whether employees are returning from these locations, even if the travel was personal.

## B. Confidentiality of Medical Information

**B.1. (Added April 9, 2020): May an employer store in existing medical files information it obtains related to COVID-19, including the results of taking an employee's temperature or the employee's self-identification as having this disease, or must the employer create a new medical file system solely for this information?**

The ADA requires that all medical information about a particular employee be stored separately from the employee's personnel file, thus limiting access to this [confidential information](#). An employer may store all medical information related to COVID-19 in existing medical files. This includes an employee's statement that he has the disease or suspects he has the disease, or the employer's notes or other documentation from questioning an employee about symptoms.

**B.2. (Added April 9, 2020): If an employer requires all employees to have a daily temperature check before entering the workplace, may the employer maintain a log of the results?**

Yes. The employer needs to maintain the confidentiality of this information.

**B.3. (Added April 9, 2020): May an employer disclose the name of an employee to a public health agency when it learns that the employee has COVID-19?**

Yes.

**B.4. (Added April 9, 2020): May a temporary staffing agency or a contractor that places an employee in an employer's workplace notify the employer if it learns the employee has COVID-19?**

Yes. The staffing agency or contractor may notify the employer and disclose the name of the employee, because the employer may need to determine if this employee had contact with anyone in the workplace.

**B.5. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Suppose a manager learns that an employee has COVID-19, or has symptoms associated with the disease. The manager knows she must report it but is worried about violating ADA confidentiality. What should she do?**

The ADA requires that an employer keep all medical information about employees confidential, even if that information is not about a disability. Clearly, the information that an employee has symptoms of, or a diagnosis of, COVID-19, is medical



information. But the fact that this is medical information does not prevent the manager from reporting to appropriate employer officials so that they can take actions consistent with guidance from the CDC and other public health authorities.

The question is really what information to report: is it the fact that an employee—unnamed—has symptoms of COVID-19 or a diagnosis, or is it the identity of that employee? Who in the organization needs to know the identity of the employee will depend on each workplace and why a specific official needs this information. Employers should make every effort to limit the number of people who get to know the name of the employee.

The ADA does not interfere with a designated representative of the employer interviewing the employee to get a list of people with whom the employee possibly had contact through the workplace, so that the employer can then take action to notify those who may have come into contact with the employee, without revealing the employee's identity. For example, using a generic descriptor, such as telling employees that "someone at this location" or "someone on the fourth floor" has COVID-19, provides notice and does not violate the ADA's prohibition of disclosure of confidential medical information.

For small employers, coworkers might be able to figure out who the employee is, but employers in that situation are still prohibited from confirming or revealing the employee's identity. Also, all employer officials who are designated as needing to know the identity of an employee should be specifically instructed that they must maintain the confidentiality of this information. Employers may want to plan in advance what supervisors and managers should do if this situation arises and determine who will be responsible for receiving information and taking next steps.

**B.6. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): An employee who must report to the workplace knows that a coworker who reports to the same workplace has symptoms associated with COVID-19. Does ADA confidentiality prevent the first employee from disclosing the coworker's symptoms to a supervisor?**

No. ADA confidentiality does not prevent this employee from communicating to his supervisor about a coworker's symptoms. In other words, it is not an ADA confidentiality violation for this employee to inform his supervisor about a coworker's symptoms. After learning about this situation, the supervisor should contact appropriate management officials to report this information and discuss next steps.

**B.7. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): An employer knows that an employee is teleworking because the person has COVID-19 or symptoms associated with the disease, and that he is in self-quarantine. May the employer tell staff that this particular employee is teleworking without saying why?**

Yes. If staff need to know how to contact the employee, and that the employee is working even if not present in the workplace, then disclosure that the employee is teleworking without saying why is permissible. Also, if the employee was on leave rather than teleworking because he has COVID-19 or symptoms associated with the disease, or any other medical condition, then an employer cannot disclose the reason for the leave, just the fact that the individual is on leave.

**B.8. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Many employees, including managers and supervisors, are now teleworking as a result of COVID-19. How are they supposed to keep medical information of employees confidential while working remotely?**

The ADA requirement that medical information be kept confidential includes a requirement that it be stored separately from regular personnel files. If a manager or supervisor receives medical information involving COVID-19, or any other medical information, while teleworking, and is able to follow an employer's existing confidentiality protocols while working remotely, the supervisor has to do so. But to the extent that is not feasible, the supervisor still must safeguard



this information to the greatest extent possible until the supervisor can properly store it. This means that paper notepads, laptops, or other devices should not be left where others can access the protected information.

Similarly, documentation must not be stored electronically where others would have access. A manager may even wish to use initials or another code to further ensure confidentiality of the name of an employee.

## C. Hiring and Onboarding

### C.1. If an employer is hiring, may it screen applicants for COVID-19 symptoms?

Yes. An employer may screen job applicants for symptoms of COVID-19 after making a conditional job offer, as long as it does so for all entering employees in the same type of job. This ADA rule applies regardless of whether the applicant has a disability.

### C.2. May an employer take an applicant's temperature as part of a post-offer, pre-employment medical exam?

Yes. Any medical exams are permitted after an employer has made a conditional offer of employment. However, employers should be aware that some people with COVID-19 do not have a fever.

### C.3. May an employer delay the start date of an applicant who has COVID-19 or symptoms associated with it?

Yes. According to current CDC guidance, an individual who has COVID-19 or symptoms associated with it should not be in the workplace.

### C.4. May an employer withdraw a job offer when it needs the applicant to start immediately but the individual has COVID-19 or symptoms of it?

Based on current CDC guidance, this individual cannot safely enter the workplace. Therefore, the employer may withdraw the job offer.

### C.5. (Added April 9, 2020): May an employer postpone the start date or withdraw a job offer because the individual is 65 years old or pregnant, both of which place them at higher risk from COVID-19?

No. The fact that the CDC has identified those who are 65 or older, or pregnant women, as being at greater risk does not justify unilaterally postponing the start date or withdrawing a job offer. However, an employer may choose to allow telework or to discuss with these individuals if they would like to postpone the start date.

## D. Reasonable Accommodation

*In discussing accommodation requests, employers and employees may find it helpful to consult the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) [website](#) for types of accommodations. JAN's materials specific to COVID-19 are available [here](#).*

### D.1. (Added April 9, 2020): If a job may only be performed at the workplace, are there [reasonable accommodations](#) for individuals with disabilities absent [undue hardship](#) that could offer protection to an employee who, due to a preexisting disability, is at higher risk from COVID-19?



There may be reasonable accommodations that could offer protection to an individual whose disability puts him at greater risk from COVID-19 and who therefore requests such actions to eliminate possible exposure. Even with the constraints imposed by a pandemic, some accommodations may meet an employee's needs on a temporary basis without causing undue hardship on the employer.

Low-cost solutions achieved with materials already on hand or easily obtained may be effective. If not already implemented for all employees, accommodations for those who request reduced contact with others due to a disability may include changes to the work environment such as designating one-way aisles; using plexiglass, tables, or other barriers to ensure minimum distances between customers and coworkers whenever feasible per [CDC guidance](#) or other accommodations that reduce chances of exposure.

Flexibility by employers and employees is important in determining if some accommodation is possible in the circumstances. Temporary job restructuring of marginal job duties, temporary transfers to a different position, or modifying a work schedule or shift assignment may also permit an individual with a disability to perform safely the essential functions of the job while reducing exposure to others in the workplace or while commuting.

**D.2. (Added April 9, 2020): If an employee has a preexisting mental illness or disorder that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, may he now be entitled to a reasonable accommodation (absent undue hardship)?**

Although many people feel significant stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, employees with certain preexisting mental health conditions, for example, anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder, may have more difficulty handling the disruption to daily life that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic.

As with any accommodation request, employers may:

- Ask questions to determine whether the condition is a disability;
- Discuss with the employee how the requested accommodation would assist him and enable him to keep working;
- Explore alternative accommodations that may effectively meet his needs; and
- Request medical documentation if needed.

**D.3. (Added April 9, 2020): In a workplace where all employees are required to telework during this time, should an employer postpone discussing a request from an employee with a disability for an accommodation that will not be needed until he returns to the workplace when mandatory telework ends?**

Not necessarily. An employer may give higher priority to discussing requests for reasonable accommodations that are needed while teleworking, but the employer may begin discussing this request now. The employer may be able to acquire all the information it needs to make a decision. If a reasonable accommodation is granted, the employer also may be able to make some arrangements for the accommodation in advance.

**D.4. (Added April 9, 2020): What if an employee was already receiving a reasonable accommodation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and now requests an additional or altered accommodation?**

An employee who was already receiving a reasonable accommodation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic may be entitled to an additional or altered accommodation, absent undue hardship. For example, an employee who is teleworking because of the pandemic may need a different type of accommodation than what he uses in the workplace. The employer may





discuss with the employee whether the same or a different disability is the basis for this new request and why an additional or altered accommodation is needed.

**D.5. (Added April 17, 2020): During the pandemic, if an employee requests an accommodation for a medical condition either at home or in the workplace, may an employer still request information to determine if the condition is a disability?**

Yes, if it is not obvious or already known, an employer may ask questions or request medical documentation to determine whether the employee has a “disability” as defined by the ADA (a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, or a history of a substantially limiting impairment).

**D.6. (Added April 17, 2020): During the pandemic, may an employer still engage in the interactive process and request information from an employee about why an accommodation is needed?**

Yes, if it is not obvious or already known, an employer may ask questions or request [medical documentation](#) to determine whether the employee’s disability necessitates an accommodation, either the one he or she requested or any other. [Possible questions](#) for the employee may include:

- How the disability creates a limitation;
- How the requested accommodation will effectively address the limitation;
- Whether another form of accommodation could effectively address the issue; and
- How a proposed accommodation will enable the employee to continue performing the “essential functions” of his or her position (the fundamental job duties).

**D.7. (Added April 17, 2020): If there is some urgency to providing an accommodation, or the employer has limited time available to discuss the request during the pandemic, may an employer provide a temporary accommodation?**

Yes. Given the pandemic, some employers may choose to forgo or shorten the exchange of information between an employer and employee, which is known as the “interactive process,” and grant the request. In addition, when government restrictions change or are partially or fully lifted, the need for accommodations may also change. This may result in more requests for short-term accommodations. Employers may wish to adapt the interactive process—and devise end dates for the accommodation—to suit changing circumstances based on public health directives.

Whatever the reason for shortening or adapting the interactive process, an employer may also choose to place an end date on the accommodation (for example, either a specific date such as May 30, or when the employee returns to the workplace on a part- or full-time basis due to changes in government restrictions limiting the number of people who may congregate).

Employers may also opt to provide a requested accommodation on an interim or trial basis, with an end date, while awaiting receipt of medical documentation. Choosing one of these alternatives may be particularly helpful where the requested accommodation would provide protection that an employee may need because of a pre-existing disability that puts him or her at greater risk during the pandemic. This could also apply to employees who have disabilities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Employees may request an extension that an employer must consider, particularly if current government restrictions are extended or new ones adopted.



**D.8. (Added April 17, 2020; Updated Sept. 8, 2020): May an employer ask employees now if they will need reasonable accommodations in the future when they are permitted to return to the workplace?**

Yes. Employers may inform the workforce that employees with disabilities may request accommodations in advance that they believe they may need when the workplace re-opens. This is discussed in greater detail in Question G.6. If advance requests are received, employers may begin the “interactive process” – the discussion between the employer and employee focused on whether the impairment is a disability and the reasons that an accommodation is needed. If an employee chooses not to request accommodation in advance, and instead requests it at a later time, the employer must still consider the request at that time.

**D.9. (Added April 17, 2020): Are the circumstances of the pandemic relevant to whether a requested accommodation can be denied because it poses an undue hardship?**

Yes. An employer does not have to provide a particular reasonable accommodation if it poses an [undue hardship](#), which means “significant difficulty or expense.” In some instances, an accommodation that would not have posed an undue hardship prior to the pandemic may pose one now.

**D.10. (Added April 17, 2020): What types of undue hardship considerations may be relevant to determine if a requested accommodation poses “significant difficulty” during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

An employer may consider whether current circumstances create “significant difficulty” in acquiring or providing certain accommodations, in light of the facts of the particular job and workplace. For example, it may be significantly more difficult in the pandemic to conduct a needs assessment or to acquire certain items, and delivery may be impacted, particularly for employees who may be teleworking. Or, it may be significantly more difficult to provide employees with temporary assignments, to remove marginal functions or to readily hire temporary workers for specialized positions. If a particular accommodation poses an undue hardship, employers and employees should work together to determine if there may be an alternative that could be provided that does not pose such problems.

**D.11. (Added April 17, 2020): What types of undue hardship considerations may be relevant to determine if a requested accommodation poses “significant expense” during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Prior to the pandemic, most accommodations did not pose a significant expense when considered against an employer’s overall budget and resources (always considering the budget and resources of the entire entity and not just its components). However, the sudden loss of some or all of an employer’s income stream because of the pandemic is a relevant consideration.

Also relevant is the amount of discretionary funds available at this time (when considering other expenses) and whether there is an expected date that current restrictions on an employer’s operations will be lifted (or new restrictions will be added or substituted). These considerations do not mean that an employer can reject any accommodation that costs money; an employer must weigh the cost of an accommodation against its current budget while taking into account constraints created by the pandemic. For example, even under current circumstances, there may be many no-cost or very low-cost accommodations.



**D.12. (Added April 23, 2020): Do the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act apply to applicants or employees who are classified as “critical infrastructure workers” or “essential critical workers” by the CDC?**

Yes. These CDC designations, or any other designations of certain employees, do not eliminate coverage under the ADA or the Rehabilitation Act, or any other equal employment opportunity law. Therefore, employers receiving requests for reasonable accommodation under the ADA or the Rehabilitation Act from employees falling in these categories of jobs must accept and process the requests as they would for any other employee. Whether the request is granted will depend on whether the worker is an individual with a disability, and whether there is a reasonable accommodation that can be provided absent undue hardship.

**D.13. (Added June 11, 2020): Is an employee entitled to an accommodation under the ADA in order to avoid exposing a family member who is at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 due to an underlying medical condition?**

No. Although the ADA prohibits discrimination based on association with an individual with a disability, that protection is limited to disparate treatment or harassment. The ADA does not require that an employer accommodate an employee without a disability based on the disability-related needs of a family member or other person with whom she is associated.

For example, an employee without a disability is not entitled under the ADA to telework as an accommodation in order to protect a family member with a disability from potential COVID-19 exposure.

Of course, an employer is free to provide such flexibilities if it chooses to do so. An employer choosing to offer additional flexibilities beyond what the law requires should be careful not to engage in disparate treatment on a protected trait.

**D.14. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): When an employer requires some or all of its employees to telework because of COVID-19 or government officials require employers to shut down their facilities and have workers telework, is the employer required to provide a teleworking employee with the same reasonable accommodations for disability under the ADA or the Rehabilitation Act that it provides to this individual in the workplace?**

If such a request is made, the employer and employee should discuss what the employee needs and why, and whether the same or a different accommodation could suffice in the home setting. For example, an employee may already have certain things in their home to enable them to do their job so that they do not need to have all of the accommodations that are provided in the workplace.

Also, the undue hardship considerations might be different when evaluating a request for accommodation when teleworking rather than working in the workplace. A reasonable accommodation that is feasible and does not pose an undue hardship in the workplace might pose one when considering circumstances, such as the place where it is needed and the reason for telework. For example, the fact that the period of telework may be of a temporary or unknown duration may render certain accommodations either not feasible or an undue hardship. There may also be constraints on the normal availability of items or on the ability of an employer to conduct a necessary assessment.

As a practical matter, and in light of the circumstances that led to the need for telework, employers and employees should both be creative and flexible about what can be done when an employee needs a reasonable accommodation for telework at home. If possible, providing interim accommodations might be appropriate while an employer discusses a request with the employee or is waiting for additional information.



**D.15. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Assume that an employer grants telework to employees for the purpose of slowing or stopping the spread of COVID-19. When an employer reopens the workplace and recalls employees to the worksite, does the employer automatically have to grant telework as a reasonable accommodation to every employee with a disability who requests to continue this arrangement as an ADA/Rehabilitation Act accommodation?**

No. Any time an employee requests a reasonable accommodation, the employer is entitled to understand the disability-related limitation that necessitates an accommodation. If there is no disability-related limitation that requires teleworking, then the employer does not have to provide telework as an accommodation. Or, if there is a disability-related limitation but the employer can effectively address the need with another form of reasonable accommodation at the workplace, then the employer can choose that alternative to telework.

To the extent that an employer is permitting telework to employees because of COVID-19 and is choosing to excuse an employee from performing one or more essential functions, then a request—after the workplace reopens—to continue telework as a reasonable accommodation does not have to be granted if it requires continuing to excuse the employee from performing an essential function. The ADA never requires an employer to eliminate an essential function as an accommodation for an individual with a disability.

The fact that an employer temporarily excused performance of one or more essential functions when it closed the workplace and enabled employees to telework for the purpose of protecting their safety from COVID-19, or otherwise chose to permit telework, does not mean that the employer permanently changed a job's essential functions, that telework is always a feasible accommodation, or that it does not pose an undue hardship. These are fact-specific determinations. The employer has no obligation under the ADA to refrain from restoring all of an employee's essential duties at such time as it chooses to restore the prior work arrangement, and then evaluating any requests for continued or new accommodations under the usual ADA rules.

**D.16. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Assume that prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, an employee with a disability had requested telework as a reasonable accommodation. The employee had shown a disability-related need for this accommodation, but the employer denied it because of concerns that the employee would not be able to perform the essential functions remotely. In the past, the employee therefore continued to come to the workplace. However, after the COVID-19 crisis has subsided and temporary telework ends, the employee renews her request for telework as a reasonable accommodation. Can the employer again refuse the request?**

Assuming all the requirements for such a reasonable accommodation are satisfied, the temporary telework experience could be relevant to considering the renewed request. In this situation, for example, the period of providing telework because of the COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a trial period that showed whether or not this employee with a disability could satisfactorily perform all essential functions while working remotely, and the employer should consider any new requests in light of this information. As with all accommodation requests, the employee and the employer should engage in a flexible, cooperative interactive process going forward if this issue does arise.

**D.17. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Might the pandemic result in excusable delays during the interactive process?**

Yes. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has disrupted normal work routines and may have resulted in unexpected or increased requests for reasonable accommodation. Although employers and employees should address these requests as soon as possible, the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic may result in delay in discussing requests and in



providing accommodation where warranted. Employers and employees are encouraged to use interim solutions to enable employees to keep working as much as possible.

**D.18. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): Federal agencies are required to have timelines in their written reasonable accommodation procedures governing how quickly they will process requests and provide reasonable accommodations. What happens if circumstances created by the pandemic prevent an agency from meeting this timeline?**

Situations created by the current COVID-19 crisis may constitute an “extenuating circumstance”—something beyond a Federal agency’s control—that may justify exceeding the normal timeline that an agency has adopted in its internal reasonable accommodation procedures.

## E. Pandemic-Related Harassment Due to National Origin, Race, or Other Protected Characteristics

**E.1. (Added April 9, 2020): What practical tools are available to employers to reduce and address workplace harassment that may arise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Employers can help reduce the chance of harassment by explicitly communicating to the workforce that fear of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be misdirected against individuals because of a protected characteristic, including their [national origin, race](#), or other prohibited bases.

Practical anti-harassment tools provided by the EEOC for small businesses can be found here:

- Anti-harassment [policy tips](#) for small businesses;
- Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace (includes detailed recommendations and tools to aid in designing effective anti-harassment policies; developing training curricula; implementing complaint, reporting, and investigation procedures; creating an organizational culture in which harassment is not tolerated):
  - [Report](#);
  - [Checklists](#) for employers who want to reduce and address harassment in the workplace; and
  - [Chart](#) of risk factors that lead to harassment and appropriate responses.

**E.2. (Added April 17, 2020): Are there steps an employer should take to address possible harassment and discrimination against coworkers when it re-opens the workplace?**

Yes. An employer may remind all employees that it is against the federal EEO laws to harass or otherwise discriminate against coworkers based on race, national origin, color, sex, religion, age (40 or over), disability or genetic information. It may be particularly helpful for employers to advise supervisors and managers of their roles in watching for, stopping and reporting any harassment or other discrimination. An employer may also make clear that it will immediately review any allegations of harassment or discrimination and take appropriate action.

**E.3. (Added June 11, 2020): How may employers respond to pandemic-related harassment, in particular against employees who are or are perceived to be Asian?**



Managers should be alert to demeaning, derogatory, or hostile remarks directed to employees who are or are perceived to be of Chinese or other Asian national origin, including about the coronavirus or its origins.

All employers covered by Title VII should ensure that management understands in advance how to recognize such harassment. Harassment may occur using electronic communication tools – regardless of whether employees are in the workplace, teleworking, or on leave – and also in person between employees at the worksite. Harassment of employees at the worksite may also originate with contractors, customers or clients, or, for example, with patients or their family members at health care facilities, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes. Managers should know their legal obligations and be [instructed](#) to quickly identify and resolve potential problems, before they rise to the level of unlawful discrimination.

Employers may choose to send a reminder to the entire workforce noting Title VII’s prohibitions on harassment, reminding employees that harassment will not be tolerated, and inviting anyone who experiences or witnesses workplace harassment to report it to management. Employers may remind employees that harassment can result in disciplinary action up to and including termination.

**E.4. (Added June 11, 2020): An employer learns that an employee who is teleworking due to the pandemic is sending harassing emails to another worker. What actions should the employer take?**

The employer should take the same actions it would take if the employee was in the workplace. Employees may not harass other employees through, for example, emails, calls, or platforms for video or chat communication and collaboration.

## F. Furloughs and Layoffs

**F.1. (Added April 9, 2020): Under the EEOC’s laws, what waiver responsibilities apply when an employer is conducting layoffs?**

Special rules apply when an employer is offering employees severance packages in exchange for a general release of all discrimination claims against the employer. More information is available in EEOC’s [technical assistance document on severance agreements](#).

**F.2. (Added Sept. 8, 2020): What are additional EEO considerations in planning furloughs or layoffs?**

The laws enforced by the EEOC prohibit covered employers from selecting people for furlough or layoff because of that individual’s race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, protected genetic information, or in retaliation for protected EEO activity.

## G. Return to Work

**G.1. (Added April 17, 2020): As government stay-at-home orders and other restrictions are modified or lifted in your area, how will employers know what steps they can take consistent with the ADA to screen employees for COVID-19 when entering the workplace?**

The ADA permits employers to make disability-related inquiries and conduct medical exams if job-related and consistent with business necessity. Inquiries and reliable medical exams meet this standard if it is necessary to exclude employees with a medical condition that would pose a direct threat to health or safety.



Direct threat is to be determined based on the best available objective medical evidence. The guidance from CDC or other public health authorities is such evidence. Therefore, employers will be acting consistent with the ADA as long as any screening implemented is consistent with advice from the CDC and public health authorities for that type of workplace at that time.

For example, this may include continuing to take temperatures and asking questions about symptoms (or require self-reporting) of all those entering the workplace. Similarly, the CDC recently posted [information](#) on return by certain types of critical workers.

Employers should make sure not to engage in unlawful disparate treatment based on protected characteristics in decisions related to screening and exclusion.

**G.2. (Added April 17, 2020): An employer requires returning workers to wear personal protective gear and engage in infection control practices. Some employees ask for accommodations due to a need for modified protective gear. Must an employer grant these requests?**

An employer may require employees to wear [protective gear](#) (for example, masks and gloves) and observe [infection control practices](#) (for example, regular hand washing and social distancing protocols).

However, where an employee with a disability needs a related reasonable accommodation under the ADA (such as non-latex gloves, modified face masks for interpreters or others who communicate with an employee who uses lip reading, or gowns designed for individuals who use wheelchairs), or a religious accommodation under Title VII (such as modified equipment due to religious garb), the employer should discuss the request and provide the modification or an alternative if feasible and not an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business under the ADA or Title VII.

**G.3. (Added May 7, 2020): What does an employee need to do in order to request reasonable accommodation from his or her employer because he or she has one of the [medical conditions](#) that CDC says may put him or her at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19?**

An employee – or a third party, such as an employee's doctor – must [let the employer know](#) that he or she needs a change for a reason related to a medical condition (here, the underlying condition). Individuals may request accommodation in conversation or in writing. While the employee (or third party) does not need to use the term "reasonable accommodation" or reference the ADA, he or she may do so.

The employee (or his or her representative) should communicate that he or she has a medical condition that necessitates a change to meet a medical need. After receiving a request, the employer may [ask questions or seek medical documentation](#) to help decide if the individual has a disability and if there is a reasonable accommodation, barring [undue hardship](#), that can be provided.

**G.4. (Added May 7, 2020): The CDC identifies a number of medical conditions that might place individuals at "[higher risk for severe illness](#)" if they get COVID-19. An employer knows that an employee has one of these conditions and is concerned that his or her health will be jeopardized upon returning to the workplace, but the employee has not requested accommodation. How does the ADA apply to this situation?**

First, if the employee does not request a reasonable accommodation, the ADA does not mandate that the employer take action.



If the employer is concerned about the employee's health being jeopardized upon returning to the workplace, the ADA does not allow the employer to exclude the employee – or take any other adverse action –*solely* because the employee has a disability that the CDC identifies as potentially placing him at “higher risk for severe illness” if he gets COVID-19. Under the ADA, such action is not allowed unless the employee's disability poses a “direct threat” to his health that cannot be eliminated or reduced by reasonable accommodation.

The ADA direct threat requirement is a high standard. As an affirmative defense, direct threat requires an employer to show that the individual has a disability that poses a “significant risk of substantial harm” to his own health under [federal regulations](#). A direct threat assessment cannot be based solely on the condition being on the CDC's list; the determination must be an individualized assessment based on a reasonable medical judgment about this employee's disability – not the disability in general – using the most current medical knowledge or on the best available objective evidence.

The ADA regulation requires an employer to consider the duration of the risk, the nature and severity of the potential harm, the likelihood that the potential harm will occur, and the imminence of the potential harm. Analysis of these factors will likely include considerations based on the severity of the pandemic in a particular area and the employee's own health (for example, is the employee's disability well-controlled), and his or her particular job duties. A determination of direct threat also would include the likelihood that an individual will be exposed to the virus at the worksite. Measures that an employer may be taking in general to protect all workers, such as mandatory social distancing, also would be relevant.

Even if an employer determines that an employee's disability poses a direct threat to his or her own health, the employer still cannot exclude the employee from the workplace – or take any other adverse action – unless there is no way to provide a reasonable accommodation (absent undue hardship). The ADA regulations require an employer to consider whether there are reasonable accommodations that would eliminate or reduce the risk so that it would be safe for the employee to return to the workplace while still permitting performance of essential functions. This can involve an interactive process with the employee. If there are not accommodations that permit this, then an employer must consider accommodations such as telework, leave or reassignment (perhaps to a different job in a place where it may be safer for the employee to work or that permits telework). An employer may only bar an employee from the workplace if, after going through all these steps, the facts support the conclusion that the employee poses a significant risk of substantial harm to himself that cannot be reduced or eliminated by reasonable accommodation.

**G.5. (Added May 7, 2020): What are examples of accommodation that, absent undue hardship, may eliminate (or reduce to an acceptable level) a direct threat to self?**

[Accommodations](#) may include additional or enhanced protective gowns, masks, gloves or other gear beyond what the employer may generally provide to employees returning to its workplace. Accommodations also may include additional or enhanced protective measures (for example, erecting a barrier that provides separation between an employee with a disability and coworkers or the public or increasing the space between an employee with a disability and others).

Another possible reasonable accommodation may be elimination or substitution of particular “marginal” functions (less critical or incidental job duties as distinguished from the “essential” functions of a particular position). In addition, accommodations may include temporary modification of work schedules (if that decreases contact with coworkers or the public when on duty or commuting) or moving the location of where one performs work (for example, moving a person to the end of a production line rather than in the middle of it, if that provides more social distancing).





These are only a few ideas. Identifying an effective accommodation depends, among other things, on an employee's job duties and the design of the workspace. An employer and employee should discuss possible ideas.

The [Job Accommodation Network](#) also may be able to assist in helping identify possible accommodations. As with all discussions of reasonable accommodation during this pandemic, employers and employees are encouraged to be creative and flexible.

**G.6. (Added June 11, 2020): As a best practice, and in advance of having some or all employees return to the workplace, are there ways for an employer to invite employees to request flexibility in work arrangements?**

Yes. The ADA and the Rehabilitation Act permit employers to make information available in advance to **all** employees about who to contact—if they wish—to request accommodation for a disability that they may need upon return to the workplace, even if no date has been announced for their return. If requests are received in advance, the employer may begin the [interactive process](#). An employer may choose to include in such a notice all the CDC-listed medical conditions that may place people at higher risk of serious illness if they contract COVID-19, provide instructions about who to contact, and explain that the employer is willing to consider on a case-by-case basis any requests from employees who have these or other medical conditions.

An employer also may send a general notice to all employees who are designated for returning to the workplace, noting that the employer is willing to consider requests for accommodation or flexibilities on an individualized basis. The employer should specify if the contacts differ depending on the reason for the request – for example, if the office or person to contact is different for employees with disabilities or pregnant workers than for employees whose request is based on age or child-care responsibilities.

Either approach is consistent with the ADEA, the ADA, and the [CDC guidance](#) dated May 29, 2020, that emphasizes the importance of employers providing accommodations or flexibilities to employees who, due to age or certain medical conditions, are at higher risk for severe illness.

Regardless of the approach, however, employers should ensure that whoever receives inquiries knows how to handle them consistent with the different federal employment nondiscrimination laws that may apply, for instance, with respect to accommodations due to a medical condition, a religious belief, or pregnancy.

**G.7. (Added June 11, 2020): What should an employer do if an employee entering the worksite requests an alternative method of screening due to a medical condition?**

This is a request for reasonable accommodation, and an employer should proceed as it would for any other request for accommodation under the ADA or the Rehabilitation Act. If the requested change is easy to provide and inexpensive, the employer might voluntarily choose to make it available to anyone who asks, without going through an interactive process.

Alternatively, if the disability is not obvious or already known, an employer may ask the employee for information to establish that the condition is a [disability](#) and what specific limitations require an accommodation. If necessary, an employer also may request medical documentation to support the employee's request, and then determine if that accommodation or an alternative effective accommodation can be provided, absent undue hardship.

Similarly, if an employee requested an alternative method of screening as a religious accommodation, the employer should determine if accommodation is [available under Title VII](#).



## H. Age

**H.1. (Added June 11, 2020):** The [CDC has explained](#) that individuals age 65 and over are at higher risk for a severe case of COVID-19 if they contract the virus and therefore has encouraged employers to offer maximum flexibilities to this group. Do employees age 65 and over have protections under the federal employment discrimination laws?

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) prohibits employment discrimination against individuals age 40 and older. The ADEA would prohibit a covered employer from involuntarily excluding an individual from the workplace based on his or her being 65 or older, even if the employer acted for benevolent reasons such as protecting the employee due to higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

Unlike the ADA, the ADEA does not include a right to reasonable accommodation for older workers due to age. However, employers are free to provide flexibility to workers age 65 and older; the ADEA does not prohibit this, even if it results in younger workers ages 40-64 being treated less favorably based on age in comparison.

Workers age 65 and older also may have medical conditions that bring them under the protection of the ADA as individuals with disabilities. As such, they may request reasonable [accommodation for their disability](#) as opposed to their age.

**H.2. (Added Sept. 8, 2020):** If an employer is choosing to offer flexibilities to other workers, may older comparable workers be treated less favorably based on age?

No. If an employer is allowing other comparable workers to telework, it should make sure it is not treating older workers less favorably based on their age.

## I. Caregivers/Family Responsibilities

**I.1. (Added June 11, 2020):** If an employer provides telework, modified schedules, or other benefits to employees with school-age children due to school closures or distance learning during the pandemic, are there sex discrimination considerations?

Employers may provide any flexibilities as long as they are not treating employees differently based on sex or other EEO-protected characteristics. For example, under Title VII, female employees cannot be given more favorable treatment than male employees because of a gender-based assumption about who may have [caretaking responsibilities](#) for children.

## J. Pregnancy

**J.1. (Added June 11, 2020):** Due to the pandemic, may an employer exclude an employee from the workplace involuntarily [due to pregnancy](#)?

No. Sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act includes discrimination based on pregnancy. Even if motivated by benevolent concern, an employer is not permitted to single out workers on the basis of pregnancy for adverse employment actions, including involuntary leave, layoff, or furlough.

## J.2. (Added June 11, 2020): Is there a right to accommodation based on pregnancy during the pandemic?

There are two federal employment discrimination laws that may trigger [accommodation for employees based on pregnancy](#).

First, pregnancy-related medical conditions may themselves be disabilities under the ADA, even though pregnancy itself is not an ADA disability. If an employee makes a request for reasonable accommodation due to a pregnancy-related medical condition, the employer must consider it under the usual ADA rules.

Second, Title VII as amended by the Pregnancy Discrimination Act specifically requires that women affected by pregnancy, childbirth, and related medical conditions be treated the same as others who are similar in their ability or inability to work. This means that a pregnant employee may be entitled to job modifications, including telework, changes to work schedules or assignments, and leave to the extent provided for other employees who are similar in their ability or inability to work.

Employers should ensure that supervisors, managers, and human resources personnel know how to handle such requests to avoid disparate treatment in violation of Title VII.

## K. Vaccinations – Updated May 28, 2021

*The availability of COVID-19 vaccinations raises questions under the federal equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws, including the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, as amended by the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (Title VII).*

*This section was originally issued on Dec. 16, 2020, and was clarified and supplemented on May 28, 2021. The May 2021 updates are consistent in substance with the original technical assistance and also address new subjects. (For example, see discussion of vaccine incentives under the ADA starting at K.16 and under GINA starting at K.18). On May 13, 2021, the CDC issued updated guidance for fully vaccinated individuals, exempting them from masking requirements “[except where required by federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance](#).” The EEOC is considering the impact of this CDC guidance on EEOC’s COVID-19 technical assistance provided to date.*

*The EEOC has received many inquiries from employers and employees about the type of authorization granted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the administration of three COVID-19 vaccines. These three vaccines were granted Emergency Use Authorizations (EUA) by the FDA. It is beyond the EEOC’s jurisdiction to discuss the legal implications of EUA or the FDA approach. Individuals seeking more information about the legal implications of EUA or the FDA approach to vaccines can visit the [FDA’s EUA page](#). The EEOC’s jurisdiction is limited to the federal EEO laws as noted above.*

*Indeed, other federal, state and local laws and regulations govern COVID-19 vaccination of employees, including requirements for the federal government as an employer. The federal government as an employer is subject to the EEO laws. Federal departments and agencies should consult the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force for additional guidance on agency operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*The EEOC questions and answers provided here only set forth applicable EEO legal standards, unless another source is expressly cited. Whether an employer meets the EEO standards will depend on the application of these standards to [particular factual situations](#).*

*The technical assistance on vaccinations below was written to help employees and employers better understand how federal workplace discrimination laws apply during the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its variants. The technical assistance here is based on and consistent with the federal civil rights laws enforced by the EEOC and with EEOC regulations, guidance and technical assistance. Analysis of how it applies in any specific instance should be conducted on an individualized basis.*

## **COVID-19 Vaccinations: EEOC Overview**

### **K.1. (Added May 28, 2021) Under the ADA, Title VII, and other federal employment nondiscrimination laws, may an employer require all employees physically entering the workplace to be vaccinated for COVID-19?**

The federal EEO laws do not prevent an employer from requiring all employees physically entering the workplace to be vaccinated for COVID-19, subject to the [reasonable accommodation provisions of Title VII and the ADA and other EEO considerations discussed below](#). These principles apply if an employee gets the vaccine in the community or from the employer.

In some circumstances, Title VII and the ADA require an employer to provide reasonable accommodations for employees who, because of a disability or a sincerely held religious belief, practice or observance, do not get vaccinated for COVID-19, unless providing an accommodation would pose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business. The analysis for undue hardship depends on whether the accommodation is for a disability (including pregnancy-related conditions that constitute a disability) (see K.6) or for religion (see K.12).

As with any employment policy, employers that have a vaccine requirement may need to respond to allegations that the requirement has a disparate impact on—or disproportionately excludes—employees based on their race, color, religion, sex or national origin under Title VII (or age under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (40+)). Employers should keep in mind that because some individuals or demographic groups may face greater barriers to receiving a COVID-19 vaccination than others, some employees may be more likely to be negatively impacted by a vaccination requirement.

It would also be unlawful to apply a vaccination requirement to employees in a way that treats employees differently based on disability, race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, sexual orientation and gender identity), national origin, age or genetic information, unless there is a legitimate non-discriminatory reason.

### **K.2. (Added May 28, 2021) What are some examples of reasonable accommodations or modifications that employers may have to provide to employees who do not get vaccinated due to disability; religious beliefs, practices, or observance; or pregnancy?**

An employee who does not get vaccinated due to a disability (covered by the ADA) or a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance (covered by Title VII) may be entitled to a reasonable accommodation that does not pose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business. For example, as a reasonable accommodation, an unvaccinated employee entering the workplace might wear a face mask, work at a social distance from coworkers or non-employees, work a modified shift, get periodic tests for COVID-19, be given the opportunity to telework, or finally, accept a reassignment.

Employees who are not vaccinated because of pregnancy may be entitled (under Title VII) to adjustments to keep working, if the employer makes modifications or exceptions for other employees. These modifications may be the same as the accommodations made for an employee based on disability or religion.



### **K.3. (Added May 28, 2021) How can employers encourage employees and their family members to be vaccinated without violating the EEO laws, especially the ADA and GINA?**

Employers may provide employees and their family members with information to educate them about COVID-19 vaccines, raise awareness about the benefits of vaccination, and address common questions and concerns. Also, under certain circumstances employers may offer incentives to employees who receive COVID-19 vaccines, as discussed in [K.16 – K. 21](#). As of May 2021, the federal government is providing vaccines at no cost to everyone ages 12 and older.

There are many resources available to employees seeking more information about how to get vaccinated:

- The federal government’s online [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov) site can identify vaccination sites anywhere in the country (or <https://www.vacunass.gov> for Spanish). Individuals also can text their zip code to “GETVAX” (438829)—or “VACUNA” (822862) for Spanish—to find three vaccination locations near them.
- CDC’s website offers a link to a listing of [local health departments](#), which can provide more information about local vaccination efforts.
- In addition, the CDC offers [background information for employers about workplace vaccination programs](#). The CDC provides a complete communication “tool kit” for employers to use with their workforce to educate people about getting the COVID-19 vaccine. (Although originally written for essential workers, it is useful for all workers.) See [CDC’s Essential Workers COVID-19 Toolkit](#). Employers should provide the contact information of a management representative for employees who need to request a reasonable accommodation for a disability or religious belief, practice, or observance or to ensure nondiscrimination for an employee who is pregnant.
- Some employees may not have reliable access to the internet to identify nearby vaccination locations or may speak no or limited English and find it difficult to make an appointment for a vaccine over the phone. The CDC operates a toll-free telephone line that can provide assistance in many languages for individuals seeking more information about vaccinations: 800-232-4636; TTY 888-232-6348.
- Some employees also may require assistance with transportation to vaccination sites. Employers may gather and disseminate information to their employees on low-cost and no-cost transportation resources available in their community serving vaccination sites and offer time-off for vaccination, particularly if transportation is not readily available outside regular work hours.

## **General**

### **K.4. (Added May 28, 2021) Is information about an employee’s COVID-19 vaccination confidential medical information under the ADA?**

Yes. The ADA requires an employer to maintain the confidentiality of employee medical information, such as documentation or other confirmation of COVID-19 vaccination. This ADA confidentiality requirement applies regardless of where the employee gets the vaccination.

Although the EEO laws themselves do not prevent employers from requiring employees to bring in documentation or other confirmation of vaccination, this information, like all medical information, must be kept confidential and stored separately from the employee’s personnel files under the ADA.



## ***Mandatory Employer Vaccination Programs***

**K.5. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021)** Under the ADA, may an employer require a COVID-19 vaccination for all employees entering the workplace, even though it knows that some employees may not get a vaccine because of a disability?

Yes, provided certain requirements are met. Under the ADA, an employer may require all employees to meet a qualification standard that is job-related and consistent with business necessity, such as a safety-related standard requiring COVID-19 vaccination. However, if a particular employee cannot meet such a safety-related qualification standard because of a disability, the employer may not require compliance for that employee unless it can demonstrate that the individual would pose a “direct threat” to the health or safety of the employee or others in the workplace. A “direct threat” is a “significant risk of substantial harm” that cannot be eliminated or reduced by reasonable accommodation. This determination can be broken down into two steps: determining if there is a direct threat and, if there is, assessing whether a reasonable accommodation would reduce or eliminate the threat.

To determine if an employee who is not vaccinated due to a disability poses a “direct threat” in the workplace, an employer first must make an individualized assessment of the employee’s present ability to safely perform the essential functions of the job. The factors that make up this assessment are: (1) the duration of the risk; (2) the nature and severity of the potential harm; (3) the likelihood that the potential harm will occur; and (4) the imminence of the potential harm.

The determination that a particular employee poses a direct threat should be based on a reasonable medical judgment that relies on the most current medical knowledge about COVID-19. Such medical knowledge may include, for example, the level of community spread at the time of the assessment. Statements from the CDC provide an important source of current medical knowledge about COVID-19, and the employee’s health care provider, with the employee’s consent, also may provide useful information about the employee. Additionally, the assessment of direct threat should take account of the type of work environment, such as:

- Whether the employee works alone or with others or works inside or outside;
- The available ventilation;
- The frequency and duration of direct interaction the employee typically will have with other employees and/or non-employees;
- The number of partially or fully vaccinated individuals already in the workplace;
- Whether other employees are wearing masks or undergoing routine screening testing; and
- The space available for social distancing.

If the assessment demonstrates that an employee with a disability who is not vaccinated would pose a direct threat to self or others, the employer must consider whether providing a reasonable accommodation, absent undue hardship, would reduce or eliminate that threat. Potential reasonable accommodations could include requiring the employee to wear a mask, work a staggered shift, making changes in the work environment (such as improving ventilation systems or limiting contact with other employees and non-employees ), permitting telework if feasible, or reassigning the employee to a vacant position in a different workspace.

As a best practice, an employer introducing a COVID-19 vaccination policy and requiring documentation or other confirmation of vaccination should notify all employees that the employer will consider requests for reasonable



accommodation based on disability on an individualized basis. (See also [K.12](#) recommending the same best practice for religious accommodations.)

**K.6. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021)** Under the ADA, if an employer requires COVID-19 vaccinations for employees physically entering the workplace, how should an employee who does not get a COVID-19 vaccination because of a disability inform the employer, and what should the employer do?

An employee with a disability who does not get vaccinated for COVID-19 because of a disability must let the employer know that he or she needs an exemption from the requirement or a change at work, known as a reasonable accommodation. To request an accommodation, an individual does not need to mention the ADA or use the phrase “reasonable accommodation.”

Managers and supervisors responsible for communicating with employees about compliance with the employer’s vaccination requirement should know [how to recognize an accommodation request from an employee with a disability](#) and know to whom to refer the request for full consideration. As a best practice, before instituting a mandatory vaccination policy, employers should provide managers, supervisors and those responsible for implementing the policy with clear information about how to handle accommodation requests related to the policy.

Employers and employees typically engage in a flexible, interactive process to identify workplace accommodation options that do not impose an undue hardship (significant difficulty or expense) on the employer. This process may include determining whether it is necessary to obtain supporting medical documentation about the employee’s disability.

In discussing accommodation requests, employers and employees may find it helpful to consult the [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\) website](#) as a resource for different types of accommodations. JAN’s materials about COVID-19 are available [here](#). Employers also may consult applicable [OSHA COVID-specific resources](#).

Even if there is no reasonable accommodation that will allow the unvaccinated employee to be physically present to perform his or her current job without posing a direct threat, the employer must consider if telework is an option for that particular job as an accommodation and, as a last resort, whether reassignment to another position is possible.

The ADA requires that employers offer an available accommodation if one exists that does not pose an undue hardship, meaning a significant difficulty or expense. Employers are advised to consider all the options before denying an accommodation request. The proportion of employees in the workplace who already are partially or fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and the extent of employee contact with non-employees, who may be ineligible for a vaccination or whose vaccination status may be unknown, can impact the ADA undue hardship consideration.

Employers may rely on [CDC recommendations](#) when deciding whether an effective accommodation is available that would not pose an undue hardship.

Under the ADA, it is unlawful for an employer [to disclose that an employee is receiving a reasonable accommodation](#) or [to retaliate against an employee for requesting an accommodation](#).



**K.7. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021)** If an employer requires employees to get a COVID-19 vaccination from the employer or its agent, do the ADA’s restrictions on an employer making disability-related inquiries or medical examinations of its employees apply to any part of the vaccination process?

Yes. The ADA’s restrictions apply to the screening questions that must be asked immediately prior to administering the vaccine if the vaccine is administered by the employer or its agent. An [employer’s agent](#) is an individual or entity having the authority to act on behalf of, or at the direction of, the employer.

The ADA generally restricts when employers may require medical examinations (procedures or tests that seek information about an individual’s physical or mental impairments or health) or make disability-related inquiries (questions that are likely to elicit information about an individual’s disability). The act of administering the vaccine is not a “medical examination” under the ADA because it does not seek information about the employee’s physical or mental health.

However, because the pre-vaccination screening questions are likely to elicit information about a disability, the ADA requires that they must be “job related and consistent with business necessity” when an employer or its agent administers the COVID-19 vaccine. To meet this standard, an employer would need to have a reasonable belief, based on objective evidence, that an employee who does not answer the questions and, therefore, cannot be vaccinated, will pose a direct threat to the employee’s own health or safety or to the health and safety of others in the workplace. (See general discussion in [K.5](#).) Therefore, when an employer requires that employees be vaccinated by the employer or its agent, the employer should be aware that an employee may challenge the mandatory pre-vaccination inquiries, and an employer would have to justify them under the ADA.

The ADA also requires employers to keep any employee medical information obtained in the course of an employer vaccination program confidential.

## ***Voluntary Employer Vaccination Programs***

**K.8. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021)** Under the ADA, are there circumstances in which an employer or its agent may ask disability-related screening questions before administering a COVID-19 vaccine *without* needing to satisfy the “job-related and consistent with business necessity” standard?

Yes. If the employer offers to vaccinate its employees on a voluntary basis, meaning that employees can choose whether or not to get the COVID-19 vaccine from the employer or its agent, the employer does not have to show that the pre-vaccination screening questions are job-related and consistent with business necessity. However, the employee’s decision to answer the questions must be voluntary. (See [K.16-17](#).) The ADA prohibits taking an adverse action against an employee, including harassing the employee, for refusing to participate in a voluntary employer-administered vaccination program. An employer also must keep any medical information it obtains from any voluntary vaccination program confidential.

**K.9. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021)** Under the ADA, is it a “disability-related inquiry” for an employer to inquire about or request documentation or other confirmation that an employee obtained the COVID-19 vaccine from a third party in the community, such as a pharmacy, personal health care provider or public clinic?

No. When an employer asks employees whether they obtained a COVID-19 vaccine from a third party in the community, such as a pharmacy, personal health care provider or public clinic, the employer is not asking a question that is likely to disclose the existence of a disability; there are many reasons an employee may not show documentation or other





confirmation of vaccination in the community besides having a disability. Therefore, requesting documentation or other confirmation of vaccination by a third party in the community is not a disability-related inquiry under the ADA, and the ADA's rules about such inquiries do not apply.

However, documentation or other confirmation of vaccination provided by the employee to the employer is medical information about the employee and must be kept confidential.

**K.10. (Added May 28, 2021) May an employer offer voluntary vaccinations only to certain groups of employees?**

If an employer or its agent offers voluntary vaccinations to employees, the employer must comply with federal employment nondiscrimination laws. For example, not offering voluntary vaccinations to certain employees based on national origin or another protected basis under the EEO laws would not be permissible.

**K.11. (Added May 28, 2021) What should an employer do if an employee who is fully vaccinated for COVID-19 requests accommodation for an underlying disability because of a continuing concern that he or she faces a heightened risk of severe illness from a COVID-19 infection, despite being vaccinated?**

Employers who receive a reasonable accommodation request from an employee should process the request in accordance with applicable ADA standards.

When an employee asks for a reasonable accommodation, whether the employee is fully vaccinated or not, the employer should engage in an interactive process to determine if there is a disability-related need for reasonable accommodation. This process typically includes seeking information from the employee's health care provider with the employee's consent explaining why an accommodation is needed.

For example, some individuals who are immunocompromised might still need reasonable accommodations because their conditions may mean that the vaccines may not offer them the same measure of protection as other vaccinated individuals. If there is a disability-related need for accommodation, an employer must explore potential reasonable accommodations that may be provided absent undue hardship.

## ***Title VII and COVID-19 Vaccinations***

**K.12. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021) Under Title VII, how should an employer respond to an employee who communicates that he or she is unable to be vaccinated for COVID-19 (or provide documentation or other confirmation of vaccination) because of a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance?**

Once an employer is on notice that an employee's sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance prevents the employee from getting a COVID-19 vaccine, the employer must provide a reasonable accommodation unless it would pose an undue hardship. Employers also may receive religious accommodation requests from individuals who wish to wait until an alternative version or specific brand of COVID-19 vaccine is available to the employee. Such requests should be processed according to the same standards that apply to other accommodation requests.

EEOC guidance explains that the definition of religion is broad and protects beliefs, practices, and observances with which the employer may be unfamiliar. Therefore, the employer should ordinarily assume that an employee's request for religious accommodation is based on a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance. However, if an employee requests a religious accommodation, and an employer is aware of facts that provide an objective basis for questioning

either the religious nature or the sincerity of a particular belief, practice, or observance, the employer would be justified in requesting additional supporting information. See also 29 CFR 1605.

Under Title VII, an employer should thoroughly consider all possible reasonable accommodations, including telework and reassignment. For suggestions about types of reasonable accommodation for unvaccinated employees, see [K.6](#). In many circumstances, it may be possible to accommodate those seeking reasonable accommodations for their religious beliefs, practices, or observances.

Under Title VII, courts define “undue hardship” as having more than minimal cost or burden on the employer. This is an easier standard for employers to meet than the ADA’s undue hardship standard, which applies to requests for accommodations due to a disability. Considerations relevant to undue hardship can include, among other things, the proportion of employees in the workplace who already are partially or fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and the extent of employee contact with non-employees, whose vaccination status could be unknown or who may be ineligible for the vaccine. Ultimately, if an employee cannot be accommodated, employers should determine if any other rights apply under the EEO laws or other federal, state, and local authorities before taking adverse employment action against an unvaccinated employee

**K.13. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021) Under Title VII, what should an employer do if an employee chooses not to receive a COVID-19 vaccination due to pregnancy?**

Under Title VII, some employees may seek job adjustments or may request exemptions from a COVID-19 vaccination requirement due to pregnancy.

If an employee seeks an exemption from a vaccine requirement due to pregnancy, the employer must ensure that the employee is not being discriminated against compared to other employees similar in their ability or inability to work. This means that a pregnant employee may be entitled to job modifications, including telework, changes to work schedules or assignments, and leave to the extent such modifications are provided for other employees who are similar in their ability or inability to work. Employers should ensure that supervisors, managers, and human resources personnel know how to handle such requests to avoid [disparate treatment in violation of Title VII](#).

## **GINA And COVID-19 Vaccinations**

*Title II of GINA prohibits covered employers from using the genetic information of employees to make employment decisions. It also restricts employers from requesting, requiring, purchasing, or disclosing genetic information of employees. Under Title II of GINA, genetic information includes information about the manifestation of disease or disorder in a family member (which is referred to as “family medical history”) and information from genetic tests of the individual employee or a family member, among other things.*

**K.14. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021) Is Title II of GINA implicated if an employer requires an employee to receive a COVID-19 vaccine administered by the employer or its agent?**

No. Requiring an employee to receive a COVID-19 vaccination administered by the employer or its agent would not implicate Title II of GINA unless the pre-vaccination medical screening questions include questions about the employee’s genetic information, such as asking about the employee’s family medical history.



As of May 27, 2021, the pre-vaccination medical screening questions for the first three COVID-19 vaccines to receive EUA from the FDA do not seek family medical history or any other type of genetic information. See [CDC's Pre-vaccination Checklist](#). Therefore, an employer or its agent may ask these questions without violating Title II of GINA.

The act of administering a COVID-19 vaccine does not involve the use of the employee's genetic information to make employment decisions or the acquisition or disclosure of genetic information and, therefore, does not implicate Title II of GINA.

**K.15. (Added Dec. 16, 2020; Updated May 28, 2021) Is Title II of GINA implicated when an employer requires employees to provide documentation or other confirmation that they received a vaccination from a doctor, pharmacy, health agency, or another health care provider in the community?**

No. An employer requiring an employee to show documentation or other confirmation of vaccination from a doctor, pharmacy, or other third party is not using, acquiring, or disclosing genetic information and, therefore, is not implicating Title II of GINA.

This is the case even if the medical screening questions that must be asked before vaccination include questions about genetic information, because documentation or other confirmation of vaccination would not reveal genetic information. Title II of GINA does not prohibit an employee's *own* health care provider from asking questions about genetic information. This GINA Title II prohibition only applies to the employer or its agent.

## ***Employer Incentives For COVID-19 Voluntary Vaccinations Under ADA and GINA***

### ***ADA: Employer Incentives for Voluntary COVID-19 Vaccinations***

**K.16. (Added May 28, 2021) Under the ADA, may an employer offer an incentive to employees to voluntarily provide documentation or other confirmation that they received a vaccination on their own from a pharmacy, public health department, or other health care provider in the community?**

Yes. Requesting documentation or other confirmation showing that an employee received a COVID-19 vaccination in the community is not a disability-related inquiry covered by the ADA.

Therefore, an employer may offer an incentive to employees to voluntarily provide documentation or other confirmation of a vaccination received in the community. As noted elsewhere, the employer is required to keep vaccination information confidential pursuant to the ADA.

**K.17. (Added May 28, 2021) Under the ADA, may an employer offer an incentive to employees for voluntarily receiving a vaccination administered by the employer or its agent?**

Yes, if any incentive (which includes both rewards and penalties) is not so substantial as to be coercive. Because vaccinations require employees to answer pre-vaccination disability-related screening questions, a very large incentive could make employees feel pressured to disclose protected medical information.

As explained in K.16., however, this incentive limitation does not apply if an employer offers an incentive to employees to voluntarily provide documentation or other confirmation that they received a COVID-19 vaccination on their own from a third-party provider that is not their employer or an agent of their employer.

## GINA: Employer Incentives for Voluntary COVID-19 Vaccinations

**K.18. (Added May 28, 2021)** Under GINA, may an employer offer an incentive to employees to provide documentation or other confirmation that they or their family members received a vaccination from their own health care provider, such as a doctor, pharmacy, health agency or another health care provider in the community?

Yes. Under GINA, an employer may offer an incentive to employees to provide documentation or other confirmation from a third party not acting on the employer's behalf, such as a pharmacy or health department, that employees or their family members have been vaccinated.

If employers ask an employee to show documentation or other confirmation that the employee or a family member has been vaccinated, it is not an unlawful request for genetic information under GINA because the fact that someone received a vaccination is not information about the manifestation of a disease or disorder in a family member (known as family medical history under GINA), nor is it any other form of genetic information. GINA's restrictions on employers acquiring genetic information (including those prohibiting incentives in exchange for genetic information), therefore, do not apply.

**K.19. (Added May 28, 2021)** Under GINA, may an employer offer an incentive to employees in exchange for the employee getting vaccinated by the employer or its agent?

Yes. Under GINA, as long as an employer does not acquire genetic information while administering the vaccines, employers may offer incentives to employees for getting vaccinated.

Because the pre-vaccination medical screening questions for the three COVID-19 vaccines now available do not inquire about genetic information, employers may offer incentives to their employees for getting vaccinated. See [K.14](#) for more about GINA and pre-vaccination medical screening questions.

**K.20. (Added May 28, 2021)** Under GINA, may an employer offer an incentive to an employee in return for an employee's family member getting vaccinated by the employer or its agent?

No. Under GINA's Title II health and genetic services provision, an employer may not offer any incentives to an employee in exchange for a family member's receipt of a vaccination from an employer or its agent. Providing such an incentive to an employee because a family member was vaccinated by the employer or its agent would require the vaccinator to ask the family member the pre-vaccination medical screening questions, which include medical questions about the family member. Asking these medical questions would lead to the employer's receipt of genetic information in the form of family medical history *of the employee*.

The regulations implementing Title II of GINA prohibit employers from providing incentives in exchange for genetic information. Therefore, the employer may not offer incentives in exchange for the family member getting vaccinated. However, employers may still offer an employee's family member the opportunity to be vaccinated by the employer or its agent, if they take certain steps to ensure GINA compliance.

**K.21. (Added May 28, 2021)** Under GINA, may an employer offer an employee's family member an opportunity to be vaccinated *without* offering the employee an incentive?

Yes. GINA permits an employer to offer vaccinations to an employee's family members if it takes certain steps to comply with GINA.

# HR COMPLIANCE BULLETIN



Employers must not require employees to have their family members get vaccinated and must not penalize employees if their family members decide not to get vaccinated. Employers must also ensure that all medical information obtained from family members during the screening process is only used for the purpose of providing the vaccination, is kept confidential, and is not provided to any managers, supervisors, or others who make employment decisions for the employees.

In addition, employers need to ensure that they obtain prior, knowing, voluntary and written authorization from the family member before the family member is asked any questions about his or her medical conditions. If these requirements are met, GINA permits the collection of genetic information.

*Source: Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*